

# Closing the Achievement Gap

A POLICY ACTION GUIDE  
FOR WASHINGTON STATE'S  
SCHOOL DIRECTORS



Washington State School Directors' Association  
Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force

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# Contributors

The Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) would like to express its appreciation to members of the Achievement Gap Task Force who invested more than 150 hours in studying issues of the achievement gap and working to prepare this report. Task Force members met over a 22-month period in which they listened to educators and professionals present data about the achievement gap and strategies for closing the gap. They read and analyzed numerous research reports, discussed critical issues related to the achievement gap, generated recommendations, and provided input and oversight in the preparation of this report. Special thanks are extended to Connie Fletcher, WSSDA's President, who chaired the Task Force and kept us focused on the important issues and the work at hand.

## Members of the WSSDA Achievement Gap Task Force

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◆ Mary Fertakis	Tukwila School Board
◆ Lynn Fielding	Kennewick School Board
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◆ Rob Fukai	Spokane School Board (through 2001)
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◆ Carole Jacobs	Clover Park School Board
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Thanks are also extended to members of WSSDA's staff who supported the Task Force by coordinating the complex planning and implementation of the meetings and providing technical support, advice, and a record of our meetings.

◆ Martharose Laffey	Executive Director
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# Foreword

All children can learn. If we teach them at high levels, they will achieve at high levels. We have evidence that this is true in school after school all across the country.

There is also ample evidence that what we, as school board members, believe about children's abilities makes all the difference. If we believe that all children can learn, we will design our school systems to make this possible.

We have recognized that children don't come to our school doors in cookie cutter fashion. They reflect their homes, communities and cultures. Our schools need to address the uniqueness of each child, celebrating their backgrounds, gifts and contributions, while providing the individualized instruction, time and attention each needs to be successful.

We have learned that equity does not mean equal in measuring resources. Need should be the measure of our allocations. School board members must ask ourselves if we have aligned our resources so that all children, regardless of the learning assets and deficits they bring with them, have an even chance to meet our standards.

All of this requires courageous decision-making on the part of school boards. While reducing the achievement gap that exists among ethnic and income groups was always a moral obligation, it is now the law, too. The No Child Left Behind legislation passed by Congress in 2001 holds all districts receiving federal dollars accountable for the achievement of students in each ethnic group, for children living in poverty, for English language learners and for children needing special education assistance.

This guide presents some of the best thinking about the difficult and puzzling work of improving student achievement. Taken as whole, it gives a complete picture of what it will take to close the achievement gap.

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My thanks to the members of the Achievement Gap Task Force for their diligence and thoughtfulness and passion for the success of all students. Thanks are also due to the WSSDA Board of Directors for forming and supporting the Task Force, to the WSSDA Diversity-Multicultural Advocacy Team (D-MAT) for its advocacy of this project, to the WSSDA staff who supported the Task Force, and to Debora Boeck, our skilled consultant.

Best wishes to you all in this challenging and critically important work ahead of us.



CONNIE FLETCHER

*President, Washington State School Directors' Association  
Chair, WSSDA Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force*

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# Introduction

Educators in Washington state have made significant advances in improving education for all children. Establishing high standards and being accountable through performance assessments are critical beginnings in realizing a vision of world-class education. The goal is, and continues to be, for **all children** to meet or exceed the state's high academic standards.

As documented in numerous state reports and national studies, not all children are reaching higher levels of achievement at the same rate. In districts across Washington, large groups of students are not meeting standards, creating a gap in achievement that is evident by group. Poverty and race are substantial reasons for this gap.

Establishing the Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force and issuing this report mark the first steps in the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA's) efforts to close the achievement gap. Local school board directors must take the next steps, through governance and policy, to close the gap so that all children, regardless of race, family income or family background, can excel academically. The work of the Task Force and this report reflect WSSDA's commitment to work collaboratively with other organizations in a concerted and coordinated effort to end the disparities in achievement between groups of children.

## **The Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force**

The Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force was established in January 2001. The Task Force is comprised of Washington school board members directed to make recommendations to the WSSDA Board of Directors, and ultimately to all school boards in Washington, on the actions that would best assist school boards in closing the achievement gap. The Task Force was charged to accomplish the following:

*It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste or sex.*

— Article IX, Section 1  
Washington State  
Constitution

- ◆ Assess the achievement gap problem.
- ◆ Identify research, initiatives and other actions being taken by a variety of agencies and institutions addressing this issue.
- ◆ Based on research, catalog school board policies, initiatives and actions that have contributed to ongoing success in reducing or eliminating the performance disparity among minorities or children in poverty.
- ◆ Drawing on the Task Force members' talents and abilities, and such external resources as may be available, develop and report on best practices, model policies, or other school board actions that WSSDA and its members can implement to address the achievement gap issue.

Over the course of 22 months, the Task Force listened to numerous presentations from experts in the field and from school districts addressing equity and excellence. Task Force members reviewed research reports and articles on the achievement gap. These presentations and readings were followed by extensive discussion of policy issues and the development of recommendations, all of which are reflected in this report.

The goal of the Task Force is to arm school board directors with the knowledge, understanding and tools to improve student learning for **all children** and close the achievement gap. In response to this goal, the Task Force developed the following guiding principles to serve as a foundation for its issue analyses and recommendations.

### ◆ Guiding Principles of the Task Force ◆

Inequities persist in our society and in education, and school boards must accept a leadership role in mitigating these inequities and closing the achievement gap that exists at all grade levels and in school districts of all sizes and locations in Washington state.

- ◆ Closing the achievement gap is critical to preserving American democracy and providing all students with the skills for economic self-sufficiency and opportunities to realize their potential.
- ◆ District policies should improve student learning and ensure that all students meet the essential academic learning requirements.
- ◆ Understanding the impact of race and poverty on student learning is essential to closing the achievement gap.
- ◆ Schools cannot close the achievement gap alone. The responsibility is shared with schools, parents and larger community.
- ◆ All students can meet high standards when necessary opportunities, resources and support systems are provided.

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- ✦ All schools can close the achievement gap.
  - ✦ The achievement gap can be significantly diminished or eradicated without lowering academic standards for any student.
  - ✦ Students who have not achieved academic standards must have their academic progress accelerated to close the achievement gap.



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# Overview of the Policy Action Guide

The Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) is publishing this report from the Ad Hoc Achievement Gap Task Force to bring attention and focus to creating equity and excellence in all schools and classrooms. The report is designed to provide a framework for school board and community dialogue about the achievement gap and to assist school boards across Washington in taking action to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the disparity in achievement among groups of students.

This policy action guide begins by providing a definition and overview of the achievement gap, giving readers an understanding of what the gap is, why it exists and how it is stubbornly chronic in too many schools. Research is also presented that school boards can use to understand the achievement gap and the impact of poverty and race on student learning.

The intent is that this information helps school board members better understand the achievement gap in their own districts. Research about the achievement of students in Washington state and nationally is provided to further knowledge about the gap. Also presented is research that “dispels the myth” and gives evidence that poor students and minority students can achieve at high levels when they are taught at high levels.

The next section of the policy action guide presents what the Task Force has identified as **key policy issues** school boards need to address in closing the achievement gap. For each policy issue, context and background is presented, followed by recommendations for action by local school boards. School districts throughout Washington are actively working to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap, and examples are cited for each of the policy areas. Finally, general conclusions and policy-level

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considerations are offered to other policy makers interested in addressing the achievement gap.

School boards should use this guide as a foundation in developing an action plan specific to their school district and community for closing the achievement gap.